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An Exploratory Study of Online Social Networking within a Doctorate of Education Program

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Abstract: The professional doctorate is a degree that is specifically designed for professionals investigating real-world problems and relevant issues for a profession, industry and/or the community. The exploratory study on which this paper is based sought to track the scholarly skill development of a cohort of professional doctoral students who commenced their course in January 2008 at an Australian university. Via an initial survey and two focus groups held six months apart, the study aimed to determine if there had been any qualitative shifts in students' understandings, expectations and perceptions regarding their developing knowledge and skills. Three key findings that emerged from this study were: (i) the appropriateness of using a blended learning approach in this professional doctoral program; (ii) the challenges of using wikis as an online technology for creating communities of practice; and (iii) the transition from professional to scholar is a process that requires the guided support inherent in the design of this particular doctorate of education program.

Keywords: Doctoral Education, Professional Doctorate, Blended Learning, Wikis

Introduction

THE PROFESSIONAL DOCTORATE is specifically designed for professionals investigating real-world problems and relevant issues for a profession, industry and/or the community. The focus is scholarly research into professional practices. The research programme bridges academia and the professions, and offers doctoral candidates the opportunity to investigate issues relevant to their own practices and to apply these understandings to their professional contexts. The study on which this article is based sought to track the scholarly skill development of a cohort of professional doctoral students who commenced the course in January 2008 at an Australian university. Because they hold posi-

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tions of responsibility and are time-poor, many doctoral students have difficulty transitioning from professional practitioner to researcher and scholar. The struggle many experience is in the development of a theoretical or conceptual standpoint for argumentation (Lesham, 2007; Weese et al., 1999). It was thought that the use of a scaffolded learning environment that drew upon a blended learning approach incorporating face to face intensive blocks and collaborative knowledge-building tools such as wikis would provide a data source for understanding the development of scholarly skills. Wikis, weblogs and similar social networking software have the potential to support communities to share, learn, create and collaborate.

The development of a wiki page by each candidate in the 2008 cohort was encouraged to provide the participants and the teaching team members with textual indicators of progress. Learning tasks were scaffolded with the expectation that the candidates would complete these tasks via the wikis. The expectation was that cohort members would comment on each other's work, together with the supervisor and/or teaching team member who was allocated to each candidate. The supervisor is responsible for supervising the candidate's work through to submission of the thesis for examination and the teaching team member provides support to both the supervisor and the candidate through to confirmation.

This paper reports on the learning journey of this cohort of doctoral students during the first seven months of their programme to determine if there had been any qualitative shifts in understandings, expectations and perceptions regarding their developing knowledge and skills. The paper is grounded in the literature pertaining to doctoral studies and examines the structure of the professional doctoral programme. Following this is a discussion of the qualitative study that helped to unearth key themes regarding the participants' learning journey.

The Professional Doctorate

By their nature, professional doctorates are outcome and student driven with practitioners researching their own professional practice with outcomes evidenced by workplace innovations or advancement of practice (Fink, 2006; Tennant, 2004). In a professional doctorate, the workplace becomes the site of research with the knowledge produced within the context of application. Thus, professional doctorates, such as the Doctorate of Education, through their relevance (Tennant, 2004) and performative usefulness (Gilbert, 2005; Usher, 2002), are becomingly increasingly important in contemporary society.

Students enter professional doctoral programmes through professional experience and higher degrees but not necessarily through research (Fink, 2006). This has led to professional doctoral students being described as 'researching professionals' rather than 'professional researchers' (Bourner et al., 2001; Tennant, 2004) as the focus of the professional doctoral research is on problems of direct relevance to the student's own professional contexts and working lives (Bourner et al., 2001). McWilliam et al. (2002) summarised the characteristics of professional doctoral students as mostly mid-career professionals; studying part-time while working full-time (Crossouard, 2008); having careers that make them experience-rich but time-poor; working in professions where there is little or no recognition or reward for postgraduate study; and undertaking further study for intrinsic reasons rather than for monetary gain or other extrinsic rewards.

While professional doctoral students have a wealth of professional experience, they do not necessarily have research skills or training. The transition from practising professional

to scholar for these students may prove difficult as doctoral programmes require major changes in how students think and what students do. These transitions require paradigm shifts on several fronts: from social and psychological perspectives and also from an academic position (Ali & Kohun, 2007). From social and psychological perspectives, students are introduced to new forms of socialisation and to new contexts and cultures specific to doctoral programmes. Academically, doctoral programmes are geared towards research, with the key transformation for students, being from student to scholar. While Boote and Beile (2005) purport that doctoral students must be scholars before they can be researchers, Schulman et al. (2006) argue that as Doctor of Education students are experienced professionals, they are scholars first in that they are leaders of their profession who produce new knowledge and understandings and transform those understandings through their writings, teaching and practice.

On entry to a doctoral programme, students become aware of the magnitude and extended duration of doctoral studies (Fisher 2006). Doctoral programmes often lack a clear accountability framework so students must learn to self-manage their time and sustain momentum and motivation (Ali & Kohun, 2007; Fisher, 2006). These stresses contribute to feelings of social isolation (Ali & Kohun, 2007; Golde, 2005; Lovitts, 2001) and anxiety. It is little wonder that attrition rates for doctoral programmes are high (McAlpine & Norton, 2006) as students struggle to balance the competing demands of study and other life commitments such as family and friends. Social isolation may impede academic progression, particularly in the crucial first year of doctoral study (Ali and Kohun, 2007). One approach to reducing social isolation in doctoral programmes is by using a cohort approach (Bentley et al., 2004). In a cohort approach, students participate in coursework over an extended period of time with the cohort classes engaging in activities in group settings (Bentley et al., 2004) and, in the process, building a sense of community within the group. Some doctoral programmes using a cohort approach, such as the Doctorate of Education under scrutiny in this paper, further support students through the provision of blended learning opportunities.

Blended learning combines online instructional modes with face to face interactions (Ellis et al., 2006; Oravec, 2003). The use of well-designed and supported blended learning approaches combined with proactive help and support from tutors and peers have been linked to improved coursework submissions and to reduced rates of student attrition (Hughes, 2007). Apart from minimising social isolation, a collaborative cohort approach also assists students in making academic progression in their doctoral studies. Such an approach encourages the development of research communities, in which students provide support for each other, and call on the resources of the research community to assist them and to offer themselves as resources to others (Conrad 2006). This is significant as a strong sense of community leads to deep learning (Marton & Saljo, 1976). It is through the relationships within the learning community that academic progression occurs as students share similar problems including how to construct their research questions, how to use the literature to justify their study and how to develop a conceptual framework for their work (Conrad, 2006).

Related to research communities is the notion of 'community of practice' (COP) (Wenger, 1998; Wenger, 2000). According to Wenger (2000), communities of practice are made up of groups of people who share a similar concern or set of problems and who deepen their understandings by interacting on an ongoing basis. Central to this perspective is that knowledge construction is relational and dynamic, and learning is founded in relationships between and among people. COPs have been recognised as a significant aspect of doctoral programmes

not only for their ability to reduce isolation but also as a means to empower and support their members' learning (Lesham, 2007; Wisker et al. in Lesham, 2007). COPs can be face to face as well as virtual.

Online, e-learning or 'virtual' learning communities (Gan & Zhu, 2007; Rohleder et al., 2007) have been promoted as a valuable means of encouraging all students to actively share and construct knowledge (Chang et al. 2008). In a knowledge-building approach to education, the focus is on the construction and advancement of collective knowledge (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2002) rather than personal knowledge, and on interactive and collaborative learning, instead of independent learning (Gan & Zhu, 2007). In essence, the knowledge the community produces is greater than the sum of each individual's contributions (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2002). As virtual learning communities use knowledge-building principles and practices they provide powerful learning environments in which the advancement of knowledge building is promoted, and learning to a higher level is facilitated (Gan, 2005). Interactive computer-mediated communication tools, such as wikis and blogs, support the development of learning communities by providing opportunities for students to socialise, interact, enter into dialogue with each other, seek support and assistance and also express feelings and concerns (Dickey, 2004; Oravec, 2003). A wiki is a set of related web pages that allows users to view or change the content by editing the page online in a browser (Ebersbach et al., 2005). While wikis provide opportunities for collaboration and for peer editing, students are often hesitant to edit each other's pages and maintain strong ownership of their own pages (Ebersbach et al., 2005; Guth, 2007). Wikis also have archival and backtracking facilities through which students and teachers may examine their previous contributions (Guth, 2007) thus providing chronologically sequenced evidence of scholarly progression.

In the study the use of a blended learning approach, drawing upon intensive face to face study schools and online tools, was designed to assist students in the progression of their academic and social skills. Underpinning our pedagogical practices as teaching team members of the doctoral programme was a constructivist theoretical perspective which acknowledges that: learners are engaged in constructing meaning from their experiences; knowledge is constructed socially and through social interactions; and individuals and communities create knowledge and make sense of new knowledge (Elwood & Klenowski, 2002; Staver in Ferguson, 2007). This perspective reflected our commitment to promote and facilitate a collaborative, supportive and constructive COP (face to face and virtual) within which the cohort members could make a smooth transition from student to scholar in the professional doctoral programme.

The Professional Doctoral Programme

The professional doctoral coursework is designed as a programme of part-time study to parallel students' ongoing professional work. The coursework involves three intensive on-campus schools. The first is a four-day summer block held in January of the candidate's commencing year. Candidates are inducted into the programme and prepared for the task of critically reviewing literature in a relevant chosen field. A four-day winter school is conducted in early July of the same year. During this course the candidates begin to consider the matter of research design. The third and last unit of coursework involves a continuation of the work commenced on methodology, in which the design of the particular research project is defined and refined. It is another four-day summer school in January of the second year of enrolment

and student negotiation is a feature of this course. In evaluating the performance of candidates during each of the three coursework components of the professional doctorate, the objective is to provide clear and unambiguous feedback on progress and achievements. In this study, the focus was on students' capacity to express written ideas in a scholarly way and to provide evidence of scholarship in terms of developing capacities as practitioner/researchers throughout this phase of the Doctor of Education programme.

Once these three units of course work are completed, the candidate is well on the way to preparing for his or her confirmation. Over the next semester, the candidate works with the supervisors to finalise a confirmation portfolio which is submitted to the Faculty for review. A public seminar on its contents is given by the candidate. To achieve success at confirmation, the portfolio of work needs to meet the following criteria:

- The research aims and objectives are clearly defined.
- The research project is feasible and manageable.
- An appropriate research design and methodology have been developed.
- There is evidence that the research approach will achieve the objectives.
- There is evidence of familiarity with the literature in the chosen field and there is identification of the contribution of the proposed study to the field.
- There is evidence of a capacity to express written ideas in a scholarly way.

Once confirmation has been achieved, candidates work with their supervisors to enact the research and make it available as a thesis.

The Study

The focus of this study was on the candidates' experiences during the first seven months of their enrolment in the professional doctoral programme and represents an important time in their learning, i.e. the timeframe between two key milestones – summer school in January and winter school in July. The methodological approach used in this study is a qualitative interpretive case study. Case study was chosen because it allows researchers to gather information based on a single entity (Cavana et al., 2001) such as a cohort of doctoral students. Qualitative enquiry is a suitable approach due to its focus on participants' perceptions, experiences and meanings (Glesne, 1999). The participants are members of a cohort and a COP. Therefore, focus group interviews, rather than individual interviews, constituted the main data collection strategy and main data source. Focus group interviews or "a group conversation with a purpose" (Maykut & Morehouse,1994, p. 104) are a valuable and dynamic means of eliciting information from participants who can listen to each other and respond to each others' ideas and thoughts.

Data Sources

Two main sources of data were collected and analysed. These include a qualitative initial survey that participants completed before they commenced the first summer school, and focus group interviews held after the summer school and the winter school. The initial qualitative survey aimed to explore participants' perceptions of their roles and expectations of the degree, their knowledge and skills base regarding research and ICTs, and knowledge of and engage-

ment with a COP. The eleven enrolled students completed the electronic surveys and emailed them as attachments to the research team. Responses were collated according to the questions asked. Questions asked during the first focus group were almost identical to those included in the initial survey and were structured in nature. Structured interviews are those with predetermined questions that focus on a particular topic (Cavana et al., 2001). The main purpose of this focus group was to give participants an opportunity to discuss further the ideas they included on their surveys in the light of their recent summer school experience.

The second focus group interview asked participants a number of questions that went beyond earlier questions since it aimed to capture their perceptions of any marked shifts they may have noticed regarding their learnings about themselves and their research as well as any successes and ongoing challenges. Eight respondents who attended the winter school participated in the focus group. Both focus groups were conducted by one of the researchers of this paper and both lasted about 40 minutes. They were tape-recorded and transcribed. Triangulation of the data was achieved by using two methods of data collection (i.e. survey and focus group interviews) and by 'researcher convergence' (Lee & Bisman, 2006). Researcher convergence refers to when two or more researchers analyse the same raw data independently and this analysis is compared to decide upon codes (Cavana et al., 2001).

The Participants

Consistent with McWilliam et al.'s (2002) characteristics of professional doctoral students, the students enrolled in the 2008 cohort were mid-career, studying part-time while working full-time, experience rich and time poor and motivated to undertake the degree for intrinsic purposes. This cohort could be described also as 'researching professionals' rather than 'professional researchers' (Bourner et al., 2001; Tennant, 2004) because the foci of their studies were related closely to their professional contexts. In keeping with Fink's (2006) ideas, participants in this cohort entered the programme through their professional experience and postgraduate degrees rather than through a research route. Many of them indicated that they had either no research skills or limited skills. In response to their expectations of participating in the doctoral programme, participants commented on their desire to complete the research within the appropriate timeframe and to improve their current research and writing skills. A couple of students indicated they wanted the results of their research to '*add* value to … industry'. This is not surprising given that professional doctoral students often engage in this type of study to make a contribution to improving practice (Fink, 2006; Tennant, 2004). A further expectation was working within *'an academic community'* and '*a cohort of peers'*.

Since communities of practice is an idea that is pivotal to the functioning of this doctoral programme, the survey asked participants to explain their understanding of this term. It was evident by their responses they were familiar with this concept and had partaken in communities of practice in the past. The overwhelming majority of students indicated they had a high level of engagement with ICTs which suggested to us that they would be comfortable communicating with their peers and teaching team members via online technologies.

Building a COP via Face to Face Learning: The Journey Begins

Immediately following the four day intensive summer school block, students participated in a focus group interview. Four key themes emerged from the analysis. These related to the benefits of the summer school; their changing expectations and roles; COP; and the use and benefits of the wiki as a means of communication. Participants discussed the benefits of the summer school in enhancing their knowledge and skills and in helping them identify areas they needed to further develop. One participant summarised it well: "*I thought I had all the skills I was going to need…. But I am going to need to do a bit more synthesising*". Another mentioned the need for "*critical reviewing*" and "*scholarly rigour*". A further key benefit of the summer school was increased confidence. Another student said, "*I think that everybody has that same sort of feeling ... it's been overwhelming ... but we can do it".* Participants indicated that their expectations of the teaching team had shifted as they saw teaching team members as guides rather than instructors. Another referred to them as '*support mentors as well as colleagues*". Following on from this, one person recognised the strength in a '*team approach'* where the teaching team members represent an eclectic body of experience and views and this would be of benefit. Not surprisingly, participants' understandings of their role also changed. As one said, "*my original expectation was that I wanted to have more data to help me in my practice, now I understand I'm a creator of knowledge as well*".

A key finding was that participants acknowledged the importance of face to face interaction in enabling the COP to work effectively. The opportunity to meet during the summer school gave them time to get to know their peers, the doctoral teaching team members and supervisors. One summed it up well: "*I think I needed the face to face for the community of practice to work".* Related to this was the importance of being able to trust their peers. There was a consensus amongst participants that trust had been established during the summer school. One participant claimed that the size of the cohort "*helped this group meld very quickly into a cohesive group*". A couple of others referred to the close knit nature of the group, "*we've become a very robust group*".

The doctoral teaching team expected that participants would use the wiki as a central platform to build their COP. It was suggested to students that they structure their personal wiki pages in a specified way and publish evolving drafts of their assessment items (e.g. annotated bibliography; critical literature review) as well as inviting comment and suggestions from others. Several students anticipated that over time, they would become more comfortable putting entries on to the wiki and would benefit by the breadth of feedback from others. Another commented that using the wiki would reduce the isolation of working on one's own. Although participants indicated they had developed close and supportive relationships during the course of the summer school, the idea of using the wiki to share their own written work raised some anxieties. For instance, one said, *"I'm very reluctant to expose my soul and my feelings ... and stick them on a website".* Another said, "*I ... wasn't in favour of it initially. I'm still not*". Two participants referred to previous unfortunate experiences where "*the written word [was] used against me*" and another said, "*I felt very marginalised*".

Towards a 'Support Network' – Six Months Later

By the time of the winter school, three students had left the programme. Eight candidates remained and constituted the focus group for the interview at the end of the winter school.

Almost a quarter of the students leaving the programme in their first seven months is not surprising given the problem of attrition within doctoral programmes around the world (McAlpine & Norton, 2006). The focus of the content covered during winter school was research design and methodology. As with the summer school, participants again referred to the benefits of the winter school, their changing expectations, and their experiences of the COP. Apart from broadening their knowledge about methodology and theoretical frameworks, participants referred to gaining a range of valuable learnings from the winter school. They referred to specific elements of the programme such as individual guest speakers, opportunities for interactions with teaching team members, networking with peers, presenting their works in progress to their peers, and generally a broadening of their knowledge about methodology and theoretical frameworks. Several participants alluded to the supportive and scaffolded structure of the doctoral programme in general characterised by its developmental focus. On reflecting on the winter school, one participant said, "*after this week I now know what I don't know,… this week has really crystallised"*.

Participants' expectations of themselves as learners and of the programme were couched in very positive terms. A key theme was that participants saw their role as a developing and ongoing one – one that was moving and had moved from being passive to becoming more active. As one participant said, *"I've got more of a stance now"* while another said, "*it's developed from a passive learner into a more critical and more active learning* [role]". Several students either implied or indicated they were now more confident to apply their understandings and set of critical tools to comment on their peers' work even though the topic may be unfamiliar. One student put it thus: *'it [the doctoral programme] gives you that vocabulary to discuss research on an equal level with anyone doing a project, whether they're doing grounded theory… whatever"*.

Participants referred to a number of external communities of practice in which they were engaging. Their views about whether they as a cohort had been operating as a COP were adamant. They claimed that their cohort was *not* a COP: '*we are a support network'*. This participant went on to say, '*I don't think we can ever be a community of practice because there are not enough points of intersection or commonalities*'. Although all students were travelling on a doctoral journey, facing some similar challenges and needing to reach similar milestones, students' research topics and designs were fundamentally different. Central to their operation as a 'support network' was sharing and supportive feedback to one another rather than critique and critical comment. A couple of participants referred to potential 'legal cases' that could arise from writing something critical about another's work. Furthermore, participants alluded to not feeling comfortable engaging in critique because they did not have the conceptual tools or knowledge of the content area or research design to do so. Yet, evident in their responses was the expectation that they would provide more critical feedback in the future due to their recent experience of winter school. For instance, one said, "*I think after this week … now that I kind of understand where people are coming from I can actually give some comment*". Another said she would be giving *'constructive feedback'* to her peers.

Of interest was that participants utilised email as their main point of contact and avoided using the wiki. Participants referred to the email as '*the unofficial wiki'* and *'the underground wiki'*. After the summer school, one participant established an email list as a means of everyone keeping in touch. Highlighting the importance of email communication, one participant said that that unless '*we had the underground wiki, we all would have dropped our*

bundles". As it turned out, participants used the wiki only to upload drafts of their work since this was a requirement stipulated by the teaching team. There was little or no feedback provided by students on other students' written work. Reluctance to use wiki seemed related to participants' unwillingness to provide critical feedback to others. One participant said, "*I was a little bit scared to actually write anything – comment on the wiki because I knew that there was surveillance".* In contrast to her peers, one participant who was using wikis as part of her research study claimed that her wiki site was '*shared with the entire world*'.

Discussion and Conclusion

Three main issues emerged from this research and these include (i) the appropriateness of using a blended learning approach for a doctoral cohort; (ii) the challenges of using wikis as an online technology for creating communities of practice; and (iii) that the transition from student to scholar is a process that is unlikely to be achieved or recognised in a short timeframe. In the wider literature, blended learning approaches comprising face to face interactions and online technologies (Oravec, 2003) have been associated with many positive outcomes for learners (Hughes, 2007). In the current study, participants particularly appreciated the face to face interactions, via the summer and winter school classes, which are a central design of the doctor of education programme. Participants commented that their knowledge and skills both broadened and deepened and by the end of the second intensive class, they recognised a significant change in themselves. They had shifted from feelings of insecurity and anxiety due to the magnitude of the task that lay ahead (Fisher, 2006) to recognising they were more knowledgeable, confident and self-directing learners (Grover, 2007). It is not surprising that students indicated they developed greater conceptual tools, research skills and confidence, as findings in a study of doctoral students over a period of a year by Leshem (2007) were similar.

The face to face component of the programme also enabled respectful, supportive and trusting relationships to be forged amongst students, their peers and the teaching staff, thus setting up an environment where social isolation was reduced (Bentley et al., 2004). Noteworthy is that email, not wikis, was the online technology that students chose to use. Email was the major mode of communication that enabled students to share their feelings and concerns (Dickey, 2004; Oravec, 2003) about the tasks they faced as well as providing a forum where they could support each other and provide feedback and assistance. They described the way they worked as a cohort as a 'support network' rather than a COP. Yet it could be argued that in some ways, the type of support network they established shares some key features of a COP. For instance, participants were passionate about their practice, they had a shared concern/problem (i.e. undertaking a professional doctorate) and they interacted on a regular basis (Wenger, 2000). In other ways, though, it appears that their support network was based on 'support' rather than collective knowledge advancement (Gan & Zhu, 2007; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2002; Wenger, 2000) which lies at the heart of communities of practice.

While email was deemed to be a successful supportive online technology for this cohort, wikis were fraught with challenges. The teaching team intended that students would use the wikis not only to share opinions and resources but also to build knowledge (Gan & Zhu, 2007) and develop a powerful learning environment where collaborative knowledge creation was evident (Gan, 2005). Students used the wiki space to publish drafts of their work required

by the teaching team, but they had little or no engagement with other student drafts. This was in contrast to the ideas of Scardamalia and Bereiter (2002) who argued that participants engage in communities to improve their artefacts not to simply complete the tasks. As discussed earlier, a number of factors stymied participants' willingness to contribute to the wiki. One of these was a lack of expertise and confidence to provide critique on another's work. Writers in the field (Ebersbach et al., 2005; Guth 2007) have also identified this as a reason for students' reluctance to participate in wikis. That most of the teaching team and supervisors failed to use the wiki to provide written feedback on students' work (instead they included their comments on students' hard copies), did little to promote the wiki as a collaborative knowledge making tool.

Finally, the findings of the study reinforce the notion that making the transition from professional to scholar is unlikely to happen in a time frame as short as the first seven months of a programme. As Ali and Kohun (2007) indicate, this shift requires major changes, even paradigm shifts, to how students think. Via a blended learning approach, the teaching team endeavoured to scaffold student learning, setting up the conditions to assist them to make a shift in their journey. After seven months in the program, students indicated they had made a considerable shift in thinking. Yet that leap was still not considerable enough to encourage them to use the wiki to provide critical comment on their peers' work. In retrospect, this is unsurprising given that students themselves were struggling to understand notions of critical writing and reading. It seems that it may be too early for the teaching team to make an evaluation based on how great that shift has been for students.

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